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The Bible Passage That Helped Turn Me Into A Flaming Liberal

LAST UPDATED ON: MARCH 6, 2022 AT 10:53 PM BY JAYSON D. BRADLEY (HTTPS://WWW.PATHEOS.COM/BLOGS/JAYSONDBRADLEY/AUTHOR/JDBRADLEY/)

I didn't become a Christian until I was in my early twenties. Yet, decades later, I often wonder if I could be persuaded to care about Jesus in the current cultural climate.

American Christian culture has done its best to diminish the flames of faith in me. If I was on the outside looking in today, there's precious little in contemporary Christian expressions of faith that would convince me of Christian truth claims or the value of believing.

In fact, culturally speaking, there seem to be too many indicators that Christian faith makes one more belligerent, unyielding, and unloving than having no faith at all.

The church's drift to the right

In the early 90s, Christianity was already pretty entrenched in right-leaning political politics. The Christian voting bloc was vast and influential, and conservatives knew that locking those votes down would win elections.

They pandered to Christians so heavily in their language and issues that American Christians naturally believed that the Republican party was a direct expression of the values of this Christian Nation®.

This meant that personal autonomy was the most important expression of freedom. Therefore, any suggested legislation that curtailed my liberty (mask-wearing, common-sense gun laws, etc.) was a plan orchestrated in the pit of hell to curtail my god-given autonomy.

But while Christians wanted to protect their personal freedoms, they didn't see any problem legislating their religious convictions upon others. If they were convinced God was on their side, there was no law too invasive to pass, whether to stop a gay couple from marrying or restrict a woman's access to safe abortions.

Sharia law was when Islamists wanted to restrict freedoms on behalf of the Qur'an. But doing the same on behalf of Christian scripture was somehow different.

Freedom for me, not for thee.

God said it. I believe it. That settles it.

This only worked if all Christians assumed the same interpretation of Scripture. So the marriage between right-wing politics and Christianity required a rigid, dogmatic, fundamentalist understanding of the Bible.

Asking questions was verboten. The church existed to tell you *what* to think, not *how*. God was a very clear, rule-setting diety, and it was our job to get on board or suffer the consequences.

But this rigidity existed within this grace economy where one could be forgiven for sins provided you expressed remorse. It was vending-machine mercy where the cost was an apology.

This is why someone convicted of spousal abuse repeatedly could be a Christian in good standing, but a gay man couldn't. You got a clean slate the minute you apologize for beating your wife and promise never to do it again. A gay man's sin *was* his identity, and there's no way to be forgiven for that (unless they turned away from the "lifestyle" and demonstrated they were "fixed").

Homosexuality was a character issue.
Spousal abuse was a mistake.

Eventually, issues like homosexuality became a litmus test. The minute you demonstrated acceptance and affirmed a homosexuals' right to exist, you stopped being a Christian in good standing.

We considered it part of loving God and loving others. If you love God, you hate the things God hates while convincing yourself that hating the "sin" was somehow different than hating "the sinner."

The Scripture that changed everything

I was pastoring a church the day I ran across a Scripture that made me rethink everything and begin a long process of deconstruction.

In Matthew 19, the Pharisees are challenging Jesus about marriage. They ask him if it's acceptable for a man to divorce his wife for any reason.

Jesus basically tells them that these two people become one and shouldn't be separated.

Their natural follow-up is, "why did Moses say you could give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?"

Jesus is kind of trapped now. It's presented as "Moses says," but this is written in the Jewish Law. Jesus seems to be finding fault with God's Law.

Deuteronomy 24 makes it clear, "When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house…"

Jesus turns everything upside down

Now I've read Jesus' response a million times, but this was the first time I really ***read*** it. He says,

> "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery" (Matthew 19:8-9)

When evangelical Christians read this, they see one thing, "Divorce pisses off God." All that the church has been able to extract from this passage is a new rule; thou shall not divorce.

Many women have lived through decades of trauma because of the way Jesus' words here are interpreted to be a rigid expectation.

But when I saw what Jesus was actually saying, it began to reframe this Scripture (and the whole Bible) for me.

Our accommodating God

To understand Jesus' point, you need to follow his line of reasoning.

1. God has always been against divorce.
2. Moses allowed divorce because men were hard-hearted.

Thus, God wanted one thing but allowed another.

Now here are the thoughts that began to percolate as I read this.

- I have been trained to read Scripture as if it was written directly by God through intermediaries. But this discussion is entirely about what Moses wrote and why.
- Jesus indicates a difference between God's prescribed preferences and Moses' words.
- But Jesus doesn't seem to have a problem with Moses' solution (probably because forcing marriages to stay together in that patriarchal climate would lead to neglect, abuse, and even murder.)
- This means that God expressly (or tacitly through Moses) accommodated sin, allowing behavior contrary to God's preferences.

Do you see how big a deal this is?! Jesus wasn't setting a new law about divorce. Instead, he communicated God's preference and showed what God was willing to overlook to make it easier on a bunch of jerks.

The way that evangelicals define sin as "not hitting God's target," means that divorce was always a sin . . . and yet, God seems to allow Moses to write sin *into* the Law. What are we supposed to do with that? It's incredibly stunning to realize that the Bible shrugged at behavior that God didn't

particularly like or agree with. Why? Because forcing people to live by God's "standards" could actually cause more damage than simply accomodating other behaviors.

The natural implications

I cannot begin to elaborate on all this means for Christian behavior and expectations.

Like many of you, I'd spent decades hearing about a God who was just too holy to even look upon sin. Instead, a good Christian followed Jesus by following all the rules.

Here Jesus introduced me to a deity who understood the complexity of life and sin, even being willing to look the other way if accommodating sin made the world more inhabitable for everyone.

This was entirely in agreement with the God Jesus came to reveal, one whose love triumphed over his judgment.

The thing that really hit me between the eyes is that we wouldn't have known how or why Moses wrote that about divorce if Jesus didn't tell us. And the fact that there is more happening here than we can see. We can't afford to be chained to the rigidity of our narrow interpretations and understanding.

No. We need to recognize the actual point here. You don't completely know or understand Scripture or the mind of God. So it's better to err toward inclusive accommodation than rigid exclusivity.

And suddenly, I didn't allow myself to get embroiled in silly proof-texting arguments about "sins." I didn't have to definitively demonstrate whether the Bible says that God thinks something is acceptable or not. Instead, I realized that just because Moses (or someone else) said God didn't like something didn't necessarily mean that we needed rules to curtail or control that behavior.

This difficult dissonance

Inherent in this passage is a crazy choice for the fundamentalist:

- A Moses wrote divorce into the Law despite God's displeasure over the practice, in which case we need to tread carefully about how we allow the Bible to speak for God.
- Or God inspired Moses to write divorce into the Law despite being against it because God sees the complexities of sin in a way we can't and is more accommodating of our cruddy behavior than we realize.

Perhaps. Just perhaps some things we think are sinful aren't, and even if they are, maybe God is more obliging than we can conceive.

Maybe that's why Jesus summed the Law up as loving God and loving others instead of as strict adherence to Scripture.

If I'm driven by the rule of law, it's going to force me to act outside of the rule of love. But when I do my best to love God and others, it might look like I'm operating against the law's letter even though I'm aligned with its spirit.

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